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PUBLIC PRAYER

An Address Delivered at the Evanston Meeting of the Representatives of the Boards of Ministerial Training

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By

BISHOP EDWIN HOLT HUGHES

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PUBLIC PRAYER

By Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes

I

It is perhaps not quite easy and natural to think of Public Prayer as an art. The place where a man prays alone to God is such a sacred spot that no one would feel free to intrude upon it with a lecture upon grammar or rhetoric; and the place where the same man may bring with him a considerable company into the room of prayer becomes a sanctuary, so revered, so mysterious, so holy, as to forbid invasion by a teacher of technique. Even if instruction is attempted in the intermission—there is still something of the feeling that the hour of prayer is so sacred that its very sacredness is at once its protection and its preparation. It is as if the moment of communion with God left behind it a hush and sent ahead of itself a hush, and as if each hush decreed that the touch of other feet or the sound of another voice within that chapel or around its entrances or exits was a form of at least minor sacrilege.

Consequently, Public Prayer is left without much instruction. We may have chairs of homiletics, but he would doubtless be blamed who would seriously propose a science or art of Prayer-etics! It may be questioned whether, since the several reformations that released public prayer from the over-done bondage of printed forms, any teacher has arisen in our theological schools who has been widely known for his training of students in the deepest and holiest art of public praying. Speaking in general, we seem to have gone to two extremes—one group has depended almost wholly upon the prepared forms of public prayer, with slight use of the gracious spontaneity which marks many New Testament petitions; while the other group has depended upon a perilous outgushing of unprepared forms and, starting upon the journey of prayer without verbal purse or scrip, has ended in frightful poverty of expression. Surely it is not the will of God that we should become victims of either of these extremes. If Cranmer should threaten to confine us in a beautiful limitation of words, we need not feel obliged to fly to some apostle of extemporaneousness whose alleged roominess turns out to be nothing more than a desert where the plants of reverence do not grow simply because they are not nourished.

Evidently if a truly Catholic church cannot tolerate a formalism that becomes stilted and narrow, or a spontaneousness that becomes crude and careless, it must allow freedom of all the reverent methods by which men seek to bring themselves and others into the more intimate company of God.

If we turn now to the example of Christ, we shall find in Him warrants for the varied types of prayer—private and public; ritualistic and quickly personal; individual and intercessory; restful and agonizing. He seems to sweep along all the gamuts of our forms and moods. Yet there is one revealing incident wherein He touches upon the purpose and meaning of public or semi-public prayer. Standing at the grave of Lazarus and surrounded by a mourning company He lifts a prayer which the people hear, as well as God; and then gives an explanation that is itself a prayer—"Lord, I knew that thou hearest me always, but because of the people that stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me." Perhaps it is the one instance where Jesus touches upon the necessity of balancing in our hearts the sense of God's presence and the sense of the people's presence. The translations in the later versions may be of interest, if not of instruction. Weymouth puts it, "Father, I thank Thee that thou hast heard me. I know that Thou always hearest me; but for the sake of the crowd standing by I have said this—that they may believe that Thou didst send me." Goodspeed renders it, "Father, I thank you for listening to me, though I knew that you always listen to me. But I have said this for the sake of the people standing around me that they may believe that you have made me your messenger." Moffatt has it, "Father, I thank thee for listening to me. (I knew thou wouldst always listen to me, but I spoke on account of the crowd around, that they might believe thou hast sent me.") In all the translations the motive remains the same, and the phrasing does not vary in any significant way—"Because of the people that stand by"; "for the sake of the crowd standing by"; "for the sake of the people standing around me"; "on account of the crowd around"—thus go the slight variations. So far as God was concerned, the inaudible whisper of the soul would have sufficed. But there was another motive for that brief public petition that was heard by the people as well as by God Himself.

So amid these varied translations the one fact remains prominent—that those "who stand by" are the real reason for public prayer—and that, therefore, their relation to the sacred approach

is to have its influence on voice and manner and word. We may at once get the negative and yet worthy feeling that those "who stand by" may be not only the opportunity and motive for public prayer, but also its peril. Jesus declared that the Pharisees who loved to pray on the street corners became the victims of this peril. The consciousness of the human audience submerged the consciousness of the divine audience. Prayer thus became parade, or advertisement! It was a bulletin board for human eyes; a trumpet for human ears. But when we know that those eyes and ears are right there, it is not always easy to relate them only to our prayer to God, to give to them those things that alone will lift them into the sacred presence so that our ritual for the moment will be controlled by the one blessed purpose.

We have all seen illustrations of the wrong kind of self-consciousness that in public prayer made for affectation in manner or in speech; or else turned petition into soliloquy or information. Once a secular paper declared that "the prayer of the Rev. Dr. Blank was the most eloquent ever addressed to a Boston audience." It is said, too, that in the same city a man began his prayer at a meeting for reform by saying, "Lord, thou hast seen by the morning papers how wicked this city is," as if indeed the preacher were a sort of clerical newsboy tossing the Herald upon the door-step of Heaven! Long ago in the School of Theology I heard a well-known clergyman begin a public prayer by saying, "O Lord, we thank Thee that we do not have to reach Thee by any process of ratiocination." For weeks thereafter the scarcely reverent students laid their hands across their fronts and declared that they had a bad case of "ratiocination"—though their professors knew better! Later I heard that same minister in public prayer wherein he asked God to bless us "in all our steps and stops." The trouble with the doubly alliterative phrase was that it became all "stops." The preacher went on with further "steps" in prayer, but the people had nothing but "stops" and so were halted on their way to the throne of grace. Can any normal man quite appreciate the literary ambition that would lead a minister in offering the prayer at a big public dinner to ask God to bless us in all "our gustatory delights"? Or can one fathom that lack of literary delicacy, to say nothing of the lack of simple reverence, that would allow a preacher to declare in a prayer over the body of a ministerial comrade, that "Bright's disease and grace had conquered"? A little grandson a few months ago concluded a rather extraordinary

evening prayer by asking his mother—"What part of that do you like best?" In view of the adult examples one feels like asking whether the personal equation may not be so trained out of its eccentricity as that the literary devil may not have too many triumphs! Verily those "who stand by" may become the temptations of prayer.

There are other possibilities as well. Recently a clergyman, at the centennial of a Methodist Episcopal church, read a prayer which was quite largely a history of the Wesleyan movement, including the place and date of Wesley's heart-warming, but not giving the like experiences to his colleagues at that immediate altar. Several years ago a preacher of our Church turned his prayer at the opening of a political party's convention into a stump-speech that evoked human applause, but doubtless made divine sorrow. No wonder that several secular papers rebuked this approach to blasphemy! Probably all of you have known persons who used prayer for human correction. Once I had a layman, a militant fundamentalist, and a fanatic as well, who often used his prayer for the amendment of my theology! At the close of my prayer-meeting address he would proceed to hit me over the shoulder of God, if I may use a more than doubtful anthropomorphism! This he did until I felt obliged to warn him that words of pretended prayers, made over into personal and sneaking lectures, must inevitably return as curses to the altar of sacrilege.

The comprehensive rule would seem to be—*That prayer must remain prayer.* When it becomes soliloquy, information, intonation, recitation, poetization, dramatization, it in so far becomes alien to the throne of grace. When literature is its master, rather than its simple and humble servant, then prayer loses the rhetoric of heaven, and its own words go before it to speedy judgment. In one of his great plays Shakespeare makes the wicked king, who has murdered his brother in order to get his brother's crown and kingdom and queen, say at the end of a fruitless attempt to pray—

"My words fly up; my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

But the thoughts must be more than thoughts; they must be prayer-thoughts; and the vocabulary must be more than vocabulary; it must be prayer-vocabulary. The only rule that can keep those "that stand by" from an undue dominance of our praying is to lift God high above the people, and to remember that we are not orators but mediators.

II

This sends us on to a distinct question: Is there a place for direct preparation for public prayer? I fear that some would be tempted to say, No. Doubtless many ministers in our non-liturgical churches have felt that in a way public praying was a by-product—an outgrowth of a reverent mood which itself took quick and full control of all technique. Many men have confessed that they have never directly prepared a prayer for public use—feeling that the most and best they could do was to secure the awesome sense of God's presence and the urging sense of the people's need, and so to allow that sacred combination of motive to determine all manner and all speech. Of course, this is the first and great law of preparation. But is it not a peculiar heresy that would leave our most intimate form of mediation to a carelessness that may become either laziness or freakishness? When we come, even representatively, before those who are great on earth, are we in the habit of leaving ourselves wholly to the impulses of the moment, as determined by our previous conception of the greatness of the government and of the greatness of our cause? Or do we have any right to assume that direct preparation may not itself be reverence, and that it may become more and more a deep phase of reverence? In addition, are we not constantly leaving our theory in some of our holiest practices? Is the Lord's Prayer less a prayer because it is committed to memory? Are our Communion prayers less prayerful because Cranmer and other devout souls prepared them? If we should discover that Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple was more or less directly prepared, and especially that parts of it were written when the king was on his knees, would we feel that the prayer was less a prayer? Or are we to say that our certain knowledge that Paul's wonderful prayers and benedictions for the people of the various churches were themselves actually written by him makes them less prayerful? Our main contention being true and right, we should be heedful lest we allow it to carry us to the folly of saying that direct and reverent preparation for prayer is a form of irreverence! By all means, let us counsel ourselves and our younger comrades in the ministry to make public prayer a matter of all kinds of religious preparation—enriched by the study of prayer books; by the memorizing of the prayers in the Psalms and Epistles, and of all the petitioning parts of both the Old and New Testaments; and, especially in our earlier ministry, by

the more than frequent actual preparation of prayers for specific hours and occasions. If our preparation for prayer be itself prayerful, we shall not make our public prayer less prayerful.

Here, again, the phrase, "because of the people that stand by," has its meaning. Who are these that stand by? Through what experiences have they been passing? Are the children of sorrow among them? Are the men among them bearing heavy problems of business? Are the women among them in danger of becoming household drudges so that they can no longer sweep a room with a divine clause in their creeds? Sometimes we must all think that it is rather a doubtful procedure to ask a man suddenly to lead the prayers of the people when he himself knows little of the people. Perhaps in doing this we indulge in a mistaken ministerial courtesy. If the situation may be redeemed to good, it will be because that stranger knows that every fair-sized audience is a miniature world, with all of the common human glories and agonies represented in the pews! Who are these "that stand by"? is a question that may lead in itself to some very direct preparation. It may keep us from putting our prayers beyond reach, so far as the leadership of other spirits is concerned. Probably we have all had the experience of coming into the rear of a sanctuary when some man was in the very midst of his public prayer. Unless we know how to analyze the matter, we shall be almost certain to regard him as unnaturally earnest, perhaps as practically frantic! His mood is quite ahead of ours. On the road of prayer he is several leagues beyond our souls! There may be the like disjointure at the beginning of our prayers, unless we are duly cautious. I am fully convinced, after years of more or less careful study of public praying, that the one mood for the beginning of the regular pastoral prayer is that of *awe*. Study the prayers of Christ with this in mind. He never began with a crowd of affectionate adjectives—or even with one loving word. His adjectives were the words "Our," or "Heavenly," or "Holy." The prayer that begins "Our dear, loving Heavenly Father," lacks New Testament warrant. It is not yet time for that familiarity. For twenty-five years I have watched the case carefully; and I have heard but one man who could effectively begin his prayer with an adjective of love rather than of awe. The late W. B. Dukeshire, of the Vermont Conference, always addressed God immediately as "Dear Father." Somehow his voice, his manner, and, most of all, his repute in his little conference, seemed to justify that initial familiarity

with God. Personally, I think that a man should study the Bible with the greatest care that he may list and memorize the addresses by which God may be approached in public communion. "Our Heavenly Father" is a phrase of appeal so sacred that it ought not be virtually vacated by repetition. By the time it has been used forty-two times in one prayer the high school students that are keeping the count are not likely to think any more of the greatness of his fatherhood. Nor can we have any right to put God at a disadvantage by a monotonous reminder to him in the presence of those "who stand by," that our service is being held "this morning" or "this evening." I venture even to suggest that at least once a year every preacher should have stenographic reports of his prayers! The reading of these will tend to make the humble and contrite spirit into which God who inhabiteth eternity may more surely come! But the main emphasis now is this: Let us be far more than careful lest our pretended or sincere stress upon the sacredness of prayer, as forbidding direct and constant preparation for it, may betray us into a carelessness of mood, or manner, or phrase, or repetitiousness, that are themselves forms of terrible irreverence.

III

There is, however, one kind of direct preparation for public prayer that can unquestionably stand on the warrant of its own reverence. I have often had the feeling in recent years that I could tell, on hearing a minister's prayer for and with the congregation, whether he was much given to private prayer. Is it too much to affirm that our own real confidence in prayer itself may be judged by our own personal and private habits of devotion? We can imagine a man as praying in public on acccount of conventional form, or of a modern theory of symbolism; but I think that we can scarcely imagine a man as following regularly and frequently Jesus' prescription about entering the closet and shutting the door and praying to the Father in secret—unless there is for him a tremendous reality in the prayer life. But—more than this—out of that closet praying there comes the larger readiness for sanctuary praying. If we meet God often in the week, He is not so much a stranger when we meet Him at a regular hour on Sunday morning! It is also true that private praying fixes a certain reality upon the phrasing of our prayers. There is small reason for making ourselves the lonely subjects of our own rhetorical sentences, when the only one who stands by is

God. Then our idiom can scarcely evade simplicity and reverence. Therefore, the habit of private prayer is a very direct preparation even for the form of public prayer. My interpretation now is not just what Jesus meant; but I give it with the greatest of assurance. The Saviour said, "Pray to thy Father which seeth in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly." One of the open rewards of private prayer comes in the finer freedom in public prayer—because we have often before met God face to face and so are not merely occasional visitors into his holy presence.

IV

Is it not true that, as we become more and more experienced in the reverence of public prayer, we find in it a rather unique relation to character? I suppose that in our earlier days we were all more or less troubled about the ideal expressed in our Wesleyan doctrine of perfect love. The syllogism about it seemed so faultless: Major premise—God is all powerful. Minor premise—we are sinful in practice and in nature. Conclusion—The all-powerful God is equal to the utter cure of our worst spiritual disease. Often I have thought that some day I would write an article showing the dangerous possibilities of the mere syllogism in religion. We have all discovered that lonely logic does not sanctify us wholly; and doubtless few of us, as we have grown older, have yielded to an insincerity of profession. Rather do we strive to hold ourselves to personal claims that are not themselves indications of an unsanctified state! Yet is it not true that God has for us devotional heights from which we catch glimpses of that promised land? There are times in our private prayer when we are caught up into the seventh heaven where hate, and jealousy, and envy, and mean ambition, and all that contradicts the ideals for the outer Christian life, have no dominion over us; and where the love of God is so broadcast in our hearts that it seems to cover well-nigh all the spiritual areas and to bring even imagination into captivity to Christ. In our public prayers we sometimes are granted those same glimpses, perhaps those same excursions, into the country of God. In the rapture and agony of our intercession, the selfish thing drops away from our spirits; and we find ourselves close to perfect love. Later we say, "Oh that we could maintain that spiritual glow; make constant that mood of worship wherein we were enabled to bring our companions in worship unto the Lord equally with ourselves; or, more,

to mount to the Mosaic prayer that made us willing to have our names blotted from the book of God if so be that the names of our people should be more eternally and indelibly written in the volume of destiny." Am I not right when I say that for some of you those terrifying questions put to us on our entrance to the ministry, "Are you going on to perfection?" "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" find at least an approach to an answer in those high and holy moments when we lift people to God in the corporate expression of our faith and hope—in the hours when it almost seems as if we could add to the well-known lines—

"My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure,"

the statement that our hearts seem to become pure because the strength of scores of other seekers for purity joins itself to ours that all together we may make an alliance with the strength of God.

There is not time now to carry the case into a wider realm; but we can at any rate put the suggestion there. Corporate prayer must have a certain relation to corporate life. Or perhaps we could put it—social prayer is a prelude to the social gospel. Offering together the prayer of idealism, we are driven on to live together in the practice of idealism. If it may be truly said that our allied praying would be more effective if it were backed by allied living, it is just as true that our allied living would become lovelier and more efficient if it had a larger background of allied praying. Even in that complex social realm we would doubtless secure worthier results if the inevitable implications of social prayer had their larger chance. We may be lacking in the region of spiritual dynamic and so try, if again we may change the figure of speech, to draw upon banks wherein we are putting scarcely any funds! However, let us not becloud the main contention—namely, that all the meanings of social public prayer carry us surely onward to all the practices of the social gospel.

We can find a minor and yet important illustration of this in the custom of family prayers. Often it is said that there is no more touching and significant passage in Robert Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night" than the description, given by the sometimes wayward son, of family prayers. Our hearthstone worship has often been tempted to undue length; and it has, partly for that reason, sometimes been defeated by sheer monotony. Burns himself puts the sincere hearthstone scene in contrast with conventional public worship—

"Compar'd with this, how poor religion's pride,
In all the pomp of method, and of art,
When men display to congregations wide
Devotions ev'ry grace, except the heart!"

We feel constrained to cry out: "Why! Why may not both be simple and full of heart! Why may not family prayers, too, be a preparation for the prayers wherein God's wider family is gathered at the holy hearthstone, to learn anew the lesson of brotherhood and sisterhood that is irrevocably bound up with the Fatherhood to which we pray?

VI

A confident appeal may now be made to your memories—in this effort to glorify the place of public prayer. I recall a prayer offered by the late Charles H. Payne at a conference—a prayer that carried me so far into God's presence that I have never been able to escape from the lovely thralldom. I recall a prayer by the late William R. Clark, of the New England Conference, that so stirred me as to send me back into a ministry that now has stretched over thirty-five years since that memorable day—to be more of a comforter to my people, and particularly to be a better servant of that consolation so much needed in funeral hours. That prayer followed me even into a day where the tragic sorrow of a woman, who had been led to fanaticism and to an alliance with a weak and sputtering organization, brought her to see that exclamatory and artificial "hallelujahs" were not efficient in the presence of the death of her beloved; and on her minister's prayer she walked straight back to the waiting arms of that God who pitieth as a father, knowing our frame and remembering that we are dust. Nearly always the prayer is by all means the best and most important part of a funeral service. In such a prayer we lift the sorrowful above our poor commonplaces of consolation and carry them up to the very Source of Comfort in God Himself.

Memories, such as these, we all have. The stones of help are seen along our many ways of spiritual travel. At more than an occasional altar we have lifted a new Ebenezer and have said, Here the Lord gave help. Our closer memories grow into a wonderful sacredness with the passing years. Those of us who are preachers' sons often hear the parental tones in prayer. Dear phrases, at which perhaps we smiled because they were oft-repeated, come back to us now with a peculiar sense of blessing and with a summons to

the service of the inner shrine where the fathers do now minister. We wonder not that Gilder wrote such a remembrance about his Methodist preacher-father and put it into a lordly, lovely poem:

"Again the deep-toned reverent voice ascends,
Bringing to the still summer afternoon
The sense of the Eternal."

Paul himself had a memory—of how he held a prayer of the persecuted longer than he held the garments of the persecutors, and so caught God's glory on the face of a dying man that a prayer became a pursuit that had its reward on the Damascus roadway. One of those that "stood by" when Stephen prayed learned duly to stand by the One to whom the first martyr lifted his petition. Our memories are witnesses that public prayer is not to be listed among the minor services and that, under right and reverent leading, it may become the creator of a blessed climate, the builder of a very holy place.

VII

Another important generalization may be made as we conclude. The spirit of public prayer may often inform and exalt other parts of the service that are sometimes rather artificially separated. While sympathizing heartily with the present movement in our Church for the emphasis of worship and so for a worshipful conduct of religious services, I often find an inner protest against the tendency to set worship and the sermon over against each other—as if, indeed, speech about God did not often lead to immediate tribute to God and to prayer toward his holy Throne. Some of the most gripping and cleansing experiences of worship that we have ever known came to us when the sermonic words of men brought us face to face with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon that is preceded by public prayer of the right sort may itself lead on to that corporate prayer that is non-public only in the sense that it expresses itself in the whispered aspirations of scores of souls rather than in the spoken words of their lips.

Even more directly is the matter related to our hymns. A count of the books would probably show that the majority of hymns are simply public prayers. The fact that many of them are written in the first person does not prevent their being transformed into the second person plural until

we make a spiritual corporation. A little while ago I was in a service where a minister of no little eminence was suddenly called on to pray. His response was simply the repeating of the entire hymn whose first verse reads:

"My faith looks up to Thee,
Thou Lamb of Calvary,
Saviour Divine.
Now hear me while I pray,
Take all my guilt away;
Oh let me from this day
Be wholly thine."

If one man's experience was typical, that individual hymn with its "I" and "My" brought scores of people into a spiritual aggregate and made a "common supplication." Much the same thing happened in the Bishops' meeting not so long ago. We were having a prayer service—only that—and it must have continued for two and one half hours. One Bishop's prayer that night was simply a repeating of Whittier's hymn:

"Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our feverish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise,"

and so on to the final stanza,

"Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!"

As we were all on our knees we were led to treat that hymn as a public prayer; and it was at once an inspiring and exalting thing. No knowing soul will deny when I declare that our services would be enriched beyond measure if only this spirit of public prayer could be more definitely attached to the songs of our corporate worship.

You may be disposed to say that the last thing of which I treat makes a sure anti-climax. I refer to the much misused and often-underestimated Benediction. I often wonder how the Benediction developed—who first made it a permanent part of the worship of God. If some one man did it, he was among the great men of the kingdom, if helpfulness be the standard of judging. Is there anything in the tradition that St. John was the pioneer in benedictions because,

when he was too feeble to speak for long, the stalwart elders of the Ephesian church brought him into God's house on each holy day, that the old man of a hundred years might lift wrinkled hands and speak trembling words of blessing? Is it the same unconscious reasoning that so often leads us to assign the Benediction to some beloved superannuate? Let us never forget that the Benediction is a prayer. Our Discipline provides for an "apostolic benediction"; and a General Conference decision gives the ritual the rank of law! Apostolic benedictions are not many. An ordinary memory can master them in letter-perfect form in a brief time. How preferable they are to those soft effusions by which persons who aim at originality sometimes expel us rather than dismiss us! How the ancient expressions come to us freighted with the breath of millions of believers!

Let me close with two examples. One of them came to me from Dr. MacRossie. He told me of a funeral service held for Miss McLean in New York City—the service orderly, dignified, and with proper direct tribute to the good woman that had been claimed by a tragic death in a foreign land. Yet all agreed that the outstanding feature of the service was the benediction as pronounced by the late Dr. William Valentine Kelley. He was feeble and could take no other part; yet he made it memorable, not only because doubtless many felt that they might see his face no more, but also, because the benediction was a public prayer, reinforced by one of the loveliest and most noble lives given to modern Methodism.

The second illustration relates to a dear friend of Dr. Kelley—to one who within the month has seen the twilight and evening star and has met the Pilot face to face—the late William Fairfield Warren. At the time I was Acting President of Boston University, called in on account of Dr. Murlin's illness and absence in Europe, I was presiding over the Commencement Day exercises where more than 1,000 students were to graduate. I had asked Dr. Huntington, President-emeritus, to offer the prayer. Dr. Warren, being then almost ninety, could take only the benediction. Two professors helped the venerable man to the platform. He gave us the "Peace of God" benediction—that beautiful benison that is a proof of inspiration. As he proceeded with the familiar words, I found my eyes growing misty and felt the ache in my throat, and a thrill and rapture in my heart. I wondered if I were not so wearied with the added duties of the great occasion as to have lost my self-control. So I was tempted to do something that was not in-

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